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Jim Dine – Printmaking and the Tools of his Trade

Paul Coldwell

Now in his eighth decade, American artist Jim Dine (b. 1935) shows no sign of curbing either his enthusiasm for printmaking or his productivity. He reveres prints, not because of their democratic appeal, but for the simple reason that they move him. He describes seeing Ludwig Kirchner's and Emil Nolde's woodcuts and Picasso's *Vollard Suite* for the first time (reproduced in a book) and being 'physically' affected. Prints are integral to his practice, 'as important to me', he says, 'as making drawings or paintings'. Moreover, Dine has been positively evangelical in promoting the art form, perhaps nowhere more persuasively than in *Jim Dine: A Printmaker's Document*, published in 2013, where he traces his love of printmaking back to early childhood and writes candidly about his experiences making prints and working with printers, highlighting key works in the process.¹

This article draws upon a public conversation between Dine and the author at Chelsea College of Arts in London on 25 November 2015.² It seeks to identify some of the qualities of prints that are most important to Dine and addresses his use of tools, both in the making of the prints and as motifs within the works themselves. The article concludes with a discussion of *A History of Communism*, Dine's epic series of 45 lithographs with etching and engraving, completed in 2012.

Asked about the New York art scene of the 1960s, Dine responded,

We were all young artists who came together serendipitously and founded various small cooperative galleries ... it was a world that was so called Downtown in New York City and it was without collectors ... we never saw a person from a museum for a couple of years ... It was terribly exciting to be young and involved cooperatively with other artists who you respected, to express something that was post-abstract-expressionism, which we had all come from as students.³

The 1960s was also a time when new life was being breathed into printmaking. Against this backdrop,

Dine's first major foray into printmaking was a series of six lithographs – *Car Crash I–V* and *The End of the Crash*, from 1960 – featuring scrawled words and whiplash lines and based on a Happening, *Car Crash*, which Dine performed at New York's Reuben Gallery on six different occasions in 1960 (fig. 127). According to Sarah J. M. Kolberg,

Dine entered the room wearing a silver jumpsuit, a bandage wrapped around his head, white face paint with black eyeliner and lipstick accentuating his features, and two lights attached to his head. While emitting a stream of guttural sounds and despairing moans, Dine frantically drew, erased, and redrew a car on a blackboard.⁴

In the *Crash* lithographs, Dine re-enacted the sort of frantic drawing that engaged him in the Happening. The *Crash* lithographs set the stage for his future prints – in the directness of their mark making, in their embrace of spontaneity, and in the interplay between image and word. Drawn with a lithographic crayon on zinc plates, Dine lauds the greasy crayon to those present, referring to it emphatically ('the *idea* of this grease crayon') and admiringly ('drawing with it is a great pleasure; it still is a great pleasure').

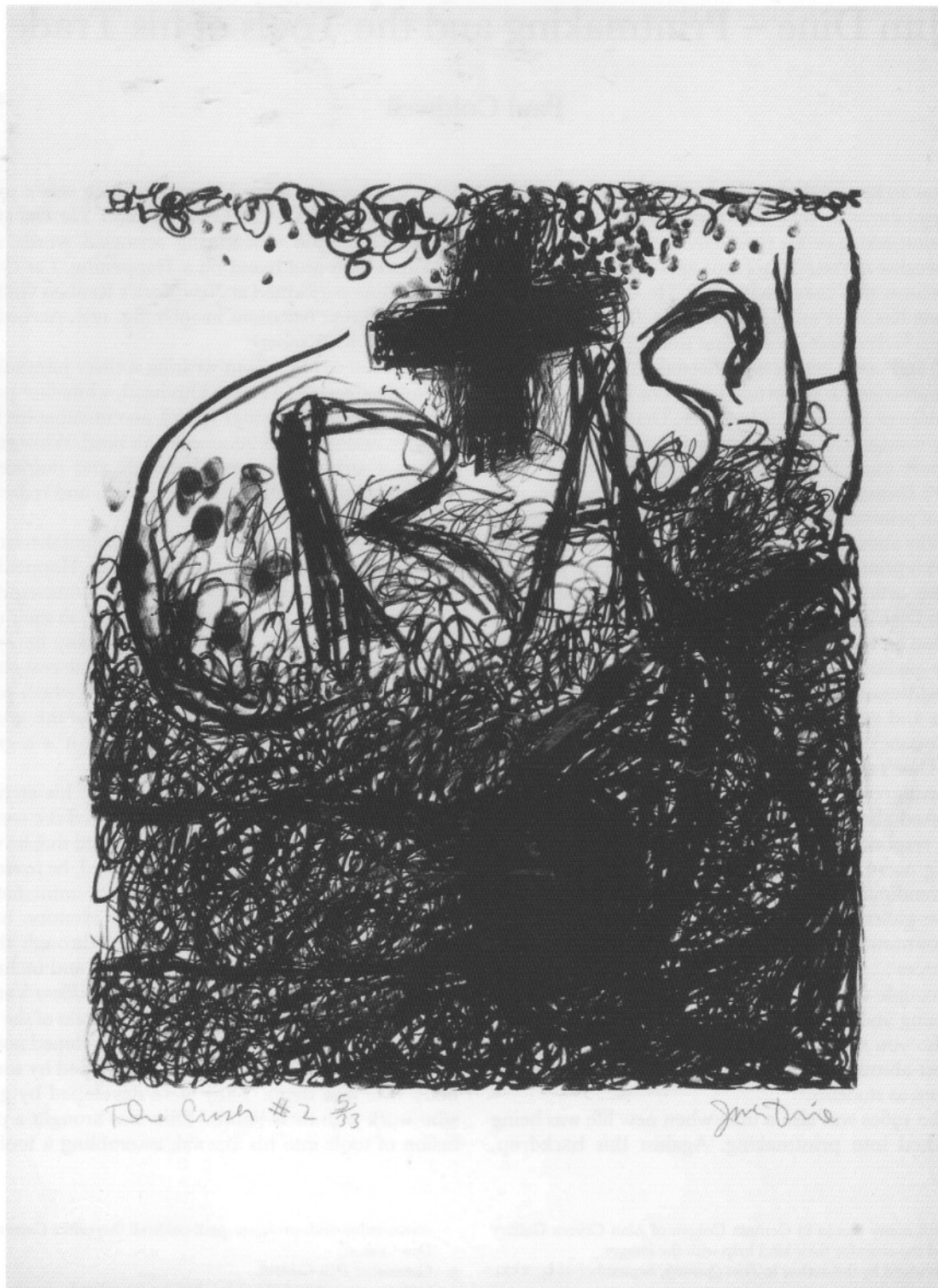
Asked during the conversation about his etching *Braid*, of 1973, and whether Dine preferred the sort of frontal view that it offered, Dine confirmed that he was 'not so interested in the side view'.⁵ Indeed, he presents his subjects so that they are clearly and immediately identifiable. Having established their identity, he is then free to improvise and put them through their paces. The range of his subjects is wide and includes bathrobes, hearts, flowers, the Roman goddess Venus, Pinocchio, self-portraits and tools. He speaks of the latter with respect: 'These tools ... were developed not by an industrial designer. They were developed by somebody who *used* them. They were developed by guys who work with their hands.' Dine has brought a profusion of tools into his arsenal, assembling a tool kit

With many thanks to Gemma Colgan of Alan Cristea Gallery and the artist for their kind help with the images.

1. Reviewed by the author in *Print Quarterly*, September 2014, XXXI, pp. 348–49.
2. Online at soundcloud.com/ccw-graduate-school/jim-dine-interview

conversation-with-professor-paul-coldwell (hereafter *Conversation Dine Coldwell*).

3. *Conversation Dine Coldwell*.
4. Online artequaltext.aboutdrawing.org/jim-dine/
5. *Conversation Dine Coldwell*.



127. Jim Dine, *The Crash #2*, 1960, lithograph, 535 x 440 mm (Image courtesy the artist and Tate, London 2015).

more associated with light industrial work than with fine-art printmaking.

The conversation turned eventually to Aldo Crommelynck (1931–2008), the French master printer perhaps most famous for his work with Picasso. Dine produced more than a hundred prints with Crommelynck and developed a close friendship. He recalled a surprise visit to Crommelynck's studio when Richard Hamilton was working there:

Richard and Crommelynck were very, very sympathetic to each other in terms of accuracy, and cleanliness, and the sanitized studio and getting [no contaminants] in the aquatint, and I just ... was very insensitive to it. I just took a grinder and started to work on one of my plates, and there was crap over everything ... they had to do everything over because I had ruined it.

Dine's anarchic approach – he calls it *sauvage* – was a far cry from Crommelynck's classically refined French methods.

In *A Printmaker's Document*, Dine writes:

To start to work at the atelier Crommelynck was like going to an Opus Dei church, the most conservative, traditional, austere, Catholic church, rather than working out in the fields like I was used to, doing what I wanted to do.⁶

Crommelynck once commented about his first meeting with Dine and how the fastidious printer had arranged a large assortment of steel-tipped etching tools to which the independent-minded artist added an array of electric tools with dental drills, as well as the kind of disc grinders normally associated with building construction. Crommelynck is one of many printers who have worked with Dine and describe themselves as tools, in the positive sense of being another tool in Dine's arsenal. Despite the artist's aggressive, even combative approach to making prints, his ties to his printers are warm and respectful. He counts on their feedback and values it, happy to have his thinking challenged.

Dine's use of angle grinders, electric sanders and dremel tools, even chain saws in the case of woodcuts, not only speeds his progress, but also provides him with the ability to erase and make corrections, leaving a trace of the tool in the process: 'I used electric tools not just because I was impatient but because of the distinctive marks they left on the plate'.⁷ His expansive use of tools has allowed him to work on a scale that is comparable with painting. In the case of *Neptune and Venus*,

a commanding 1990 triptych measuring 1,200 by 1,400 mm, one feels the physical nature of its making, how Dine manoeuvred the power tools not with his wrist but with his whole arm, from his shoulder to his hand. Whether it be a lithographic stone, woodblock or intaglio plate, there is often a sense of combat, of Dine having attacked the surface of the matrix and, interestingly, of the print becoming stronger in the encounter. In this respect, Dine's prints align with some of the Neo-Expressionists, including ones by Baselitz, A. R. Penck and Jörg Immendorff.

Long before Dine embraced electric tools as implements with which to draw, carve and mark his print matrices, simple hand tools were the subject of many of his prints, starting in 1962 in works made at Tanya Grosman's Universal Limited Art Editions (ULAE). In the ULAE lithograph *Pliers*, of 1962, which Dine considers a precursor to all his tool prints, he developed a method of tracing around the tool and then improvising, much like a jazz musician with a tune.⁸ As for representing tools, Dine says, 'I thought it was as good a subject matter as any, and I had grown up with tools [in] my family. I always related to them as objects of desire'.⁹ It is well documented that Dine grew up having a close association with tools, for his grandfather, with whom he lived as a teenager, owned a hardware store. In fig. 128, traces around a pair of pliers become the opportunity to play with a range of qualities characteristic of lithography, from crayon work to wash effects. Complete with the word *pliers*, written in cursive script along the right side of the tool, the image as a whole takes on the quality of an exploration, not just of an object but of language, an idea pushed further in the lithograph *Four C-Clamps*, also done at ULAE in 1962, where the association between word and image – the repeated presence of the letter C, from which the tool gets its name and the print its title – is even more explicit.

Dine's tools are infused with dignity and endowed with personalities. They appear to act as stand-ins for the artist and represent him as a maker. In *Jim Dine Prints, 1977–1985*, Ellen D'Oench writes:

He has consistently acknowledged his robes, hearts, and tools as the stand-ins of autobiography: the robe as self-portrait, the heart as a 'cleaved, full object' associated with the emotions, tools as the utilitarian artifacts of his grandfather's hardware store in Cincinnati.¹⁰

Dine talks openly about his having dyslexia, and it

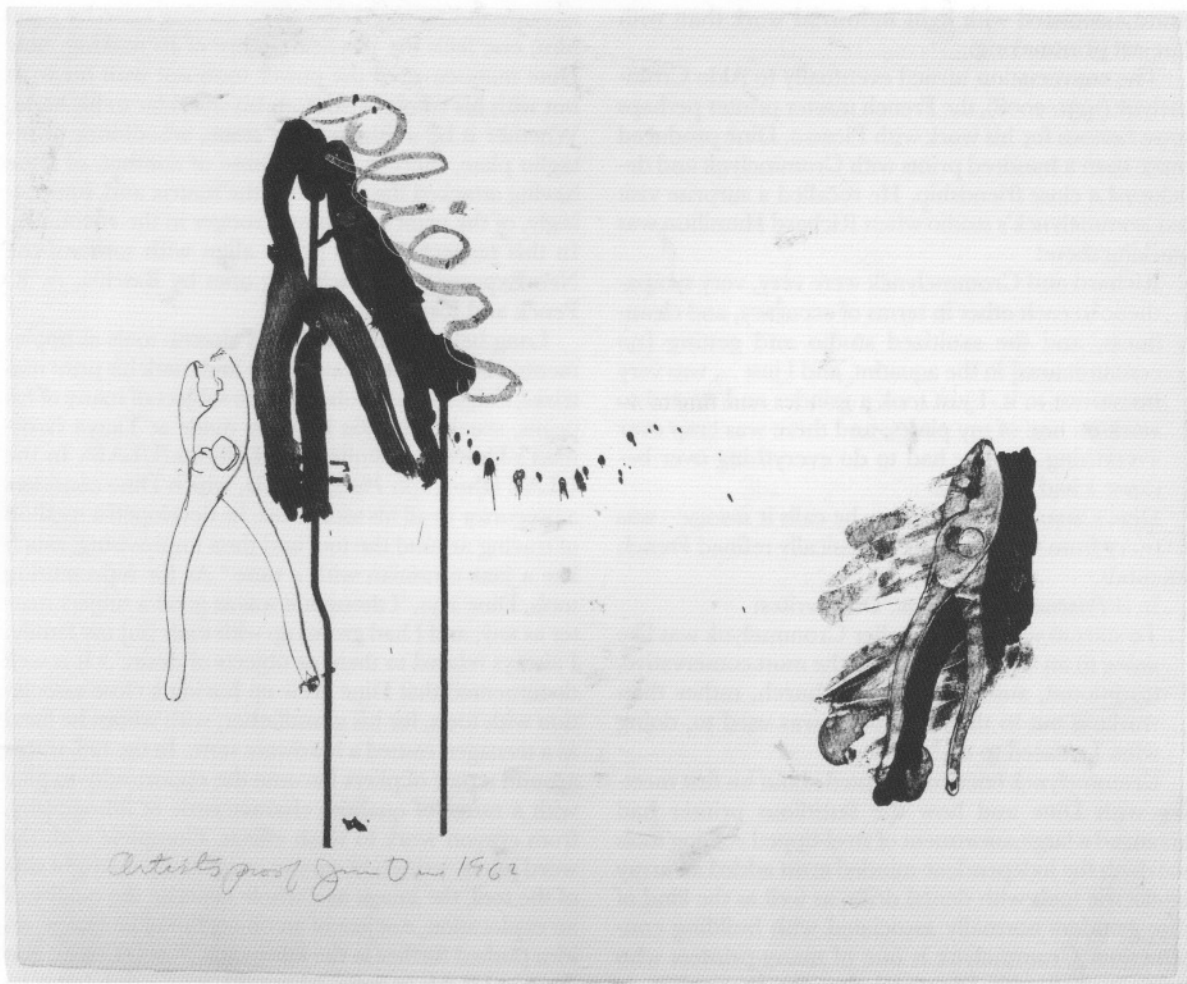
6. J. Dine, *A Printmaker's Document*, Göttingen, 2013, p. 104.

7. Ibid, p. 106.

8. Dine, 2013, op. cit., p. 17.

9. *Conversation Dine Coldwell*.

10. E. D'Oench, J. E. Feinberg and J. Dine, *Jim Dine Prints, 1977–1985*, New York, 1986, p. 1.



128. Jim Dine, *Pliers*, 1962, lithograph, 450 x 750 mm (Image courtesy the artist).

seems to have served as an impetus, partly driving his development of a visual language and his assertion of the intelligence within his hand. Dine presents the tools clearly, addressing their objectness and function – an approach shared by the photographer Walker Evans (1903–75), who in his *Beauties of the Common Tool* of 1955 (fig. 129) portrays each tool perfectly centred against a plain mid-tone background, as if instructively presented in an encyclopaedia or catalogue. ‘Among low-priced, factory-produced goods,’ Evans wrote, ‘none is so appealing to the senses as the ordinary hand tool. Hence, a hardware store is a kind of offbeat museum show for the man who responds to good, clear ‘undesigned’ forms’.¹¹ These sentiments must resonate with Dine, but

while Evans adopted an objective distance, allowing the tools to speak for themselves, as it were, through their distinct features, Dine animates and imbues his tools with autobiography. There is a connection here to Grant Wood’s famous Depression-era painting *American Gothic* of 1930, a frontal view of a man and a woman, a pitchfork centred between them. Their determination and ability to use the tool is what will save them from starvation. Dine quips that he was saved from starvation by tools, as well.¹²

A fine example of how tools (and here this includes brushes) serve Dine’s purpose can be seen in the various state changes of *Five Paintbrushes*, an etching from 1973. The print began with five brushes in a row, spa-

11. Walker Evans, *Fortune Magazine*, July 1955.

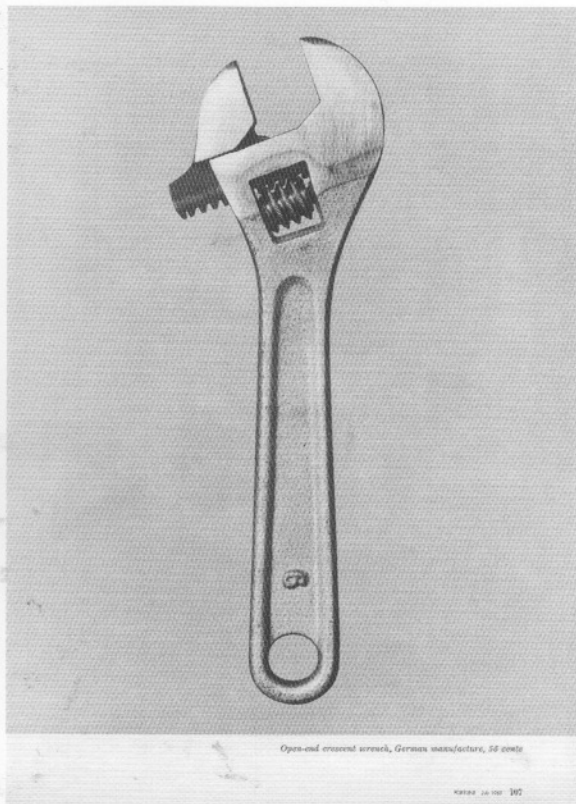
12. *Conversation Dine Coldwell*.

ciously arranged as if hanging on the wall of a workshop. Referring to Dine's *Ten Winter Tools*, a series of lithographs made the same year, the critic John Russell wrote, 'In these prints, the tools are presented as a series of discrete items, as if laid out for analysis and classification.'¹³ Clearly acknowledging Rembrandt, who Dine refers to as 'the greatest', the print plays with the linear quality of hard-ground etching, retaining the evidence of its making in the marks left by foul biting and scratches on the printing plate. The image encourages an anthropomorphic reading, the bristles suggesting bushy beards or individual strands of human hair, stirred slightly as if by a breeze.

I started the *Paintbrushes* because I was starting to *really* etch heavily and [to] use hardground etching. To make the hair of the paintbrush in hard-ground is a natural ... and then I just kept adding brushes on every state.¹⁴

In the second state, more brushes were added, bringing the total to eleven, and about 100 mm were trimmed from the right edge of the plate. The plate was trimmed again in the third state, from 596 by 812 mm down to 520 by 695 mm, and as a consequence, the brush on the far right was removed and the ten remaining brushes rise higher in the composition (fig. 130). Marks were also added using an electric drill sander, darkening the edges of the brush handles. The plate was trimmed again, down to 368 by 695 mm, in the fourth state, so that the ten brushes now fit tightly in a much-reduced field and a soft-ground texture was added across the top half of the composition. In the fifth state drypoint and etched lines were added, not only darkening and thickening the bristles but also darkening and more crisply defining a horizontal division across the image. The so-called sixth state reveals no changes to the plate, only that it was printed in a black-green ink (fig. 131).¹⁵ *Five Paintbrushes* is a print that hovers between tragedy and comedy, the brushes themselves suggesting disparate characters lined up for inspection. It is perhaps not too far to suggest that Dine's brushes evoke the character of the Texans led by John Wayne in the 1960s film *The Alamo*. A fierce independence coupled with a romantic moral integrity, plus a sense of being of the earth, is instilled in the band of brushes. This parallels a description that Dine once gave of himself: 'On the outside I was kind of like James Dean, with the heart of Christopher Robin'.¹⁶

Rembrandt provides a model for the reworking of



129. Walker Evans, *Open-end Crescent Wrench, German Manufacture, 56 Cents*, in *Beauties of the Common Tool*, portfolio published in *Fortune Magazine*, July 1955.

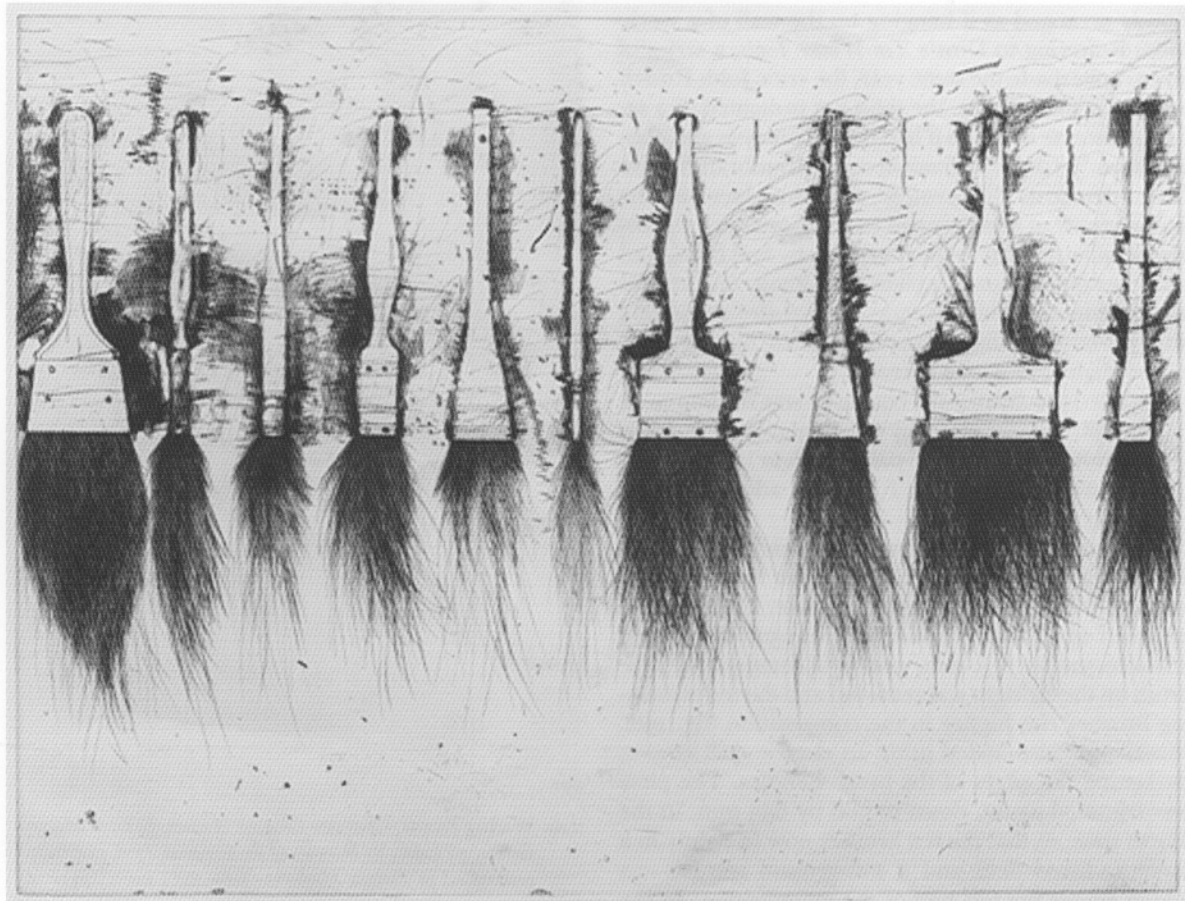
Five Paintbrushes. The Dutch artist famously reworked such prints as his *Three Crosses* and *Christ Presented to the People*. Additionally, one sees in the wiry bristles of Dine's paintbrushes a likeness to the freedom with which Rembrandt rendered the hair in his etching *The Artist's Son Titus* (fig. 132) or the beard in *Jan Lutma, Goldsmith*. But in conception and presentation, Wenceslaus Hollar's prints, in particular *A Muff in Five Views* with its erotic overtones provides the most telling comparison (fig. 133). *Five Paintbrushes* is just one of many examples in Dine's oeuvre that reveals his restlessness, his need to rework images, and his interest both in recording the various stages of a print's development and in taking an image to multiple conclusions. Dine religiously saves old plates and woodblocks, often reusing them as a type of personal strata on which to layer new

13. J. Russell in *Jim Dine: Complete Graphics*, [Berlin], Galerie Mikro Berlin, 1970.

14. *Conversation Dine Coldwell*.

15. Dine, 2013, op. cit., p. 65.

16. D. Shapiro and J. Dine, *Jim Dine*, New York, 1981, p. 205.



130. Jim Dine, *Five Paintbrushes*, third state, 1972, etching and drypoint, 520 x 695 mm (Image courtesy the artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London).

images in the process of making new prints.

An investigation of the portfolio *A History of Communism*, a set of 45 lithographs with etching completed in 2012, reveals further evidence of Dine dramatically reworking a print – in this instance, however, not one of his own images but that of someone else. Dine used abandoned lithographic stones, found at an art academy in the former socialist East Germany, as the basis for his prints. Despite the stones being poorly stored and subject to neglect for over 30 years, it was possible to restore them – reconditioning the images left on them some three decades earlier. The stones had been given to the printers Sarah Dudley and Ulrich Kühle, friends of Dine in Berlin who operate Keystone Editions. Dine spotted them while working on his first project there. He initially selected 24 stones and had twenty to thirty impressions printed of each, which, in turn, were shipped to his print studio in Walla Walla, Wash-

ington. There, working alongside the printer Julia D'A-mario, Dine took each lithographic stone and, using intaglio plates, set about imposing his own vision on the anonymous academic studies. More stones were rejuvenated, printed and sent to Walla Walla as the project progressed, and ultimately 45 prints make up the portfolio. The prints are large – on sheets measuring 940 by 710 mm – and the project was a huge undertaking, both in terms of logistics and effort. It took more than two years to bring *The History of Communism* to completion. The portfolio, intended as a single multi-image work, was printed in an edition of ten.

A key print in understanding *A History of Communism* is Picasso's *The Italian Woman (After the Painting by Victor Orsel)*, made in 1953, printed in 1955 (fig. 134). It is a print that Dine himself once owned. Picasso used a screened photolithographic plate that he came across in the corner of Fernand Mourlot's printshop. Picasso took the

zinc plate to his studio and returned the following day with the image transformed and ready for proofing. Picasso reworked and blatantly appropriated Orsel's image, reducing it to mere background. Through Picasso's assertive changes and additions, Orsel's work was subordinated to Picasso's vision. Indeed the young Italian model of the original metamorphosed, in the end resembling Picasso's mistress and muse Françoise Gilot, surrounded by bacchanalian scenes.

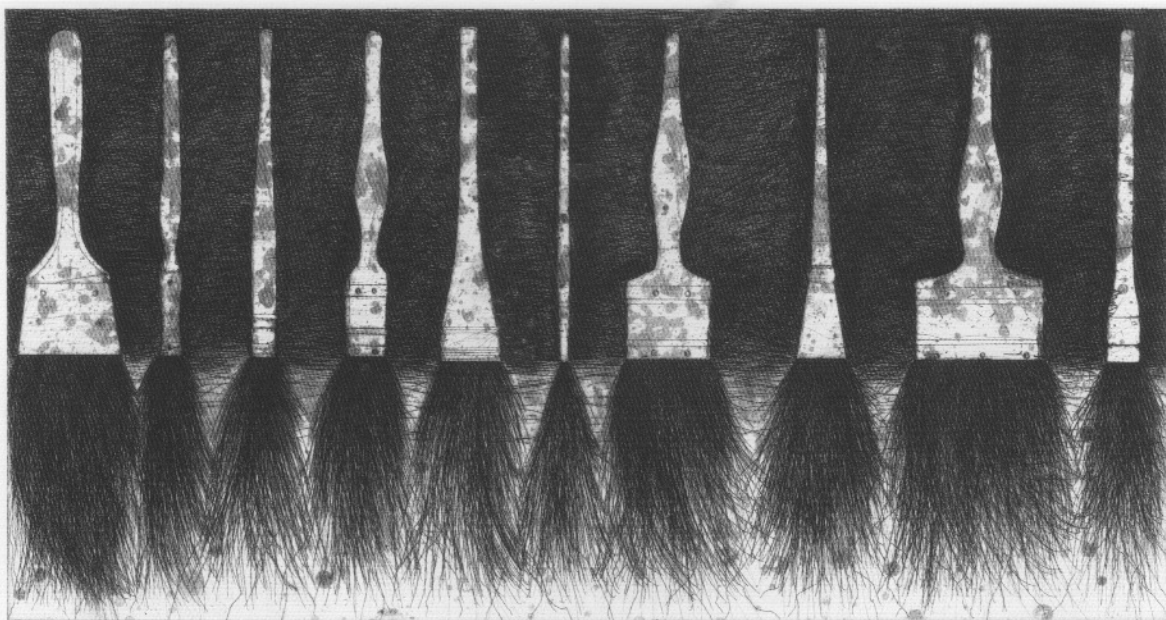
Dine turned to his lexicon of tools to transform the anonymous academic images that had survived on the lithographic stones. As Gwendolyn Sasse writes, drawing, grinding, and biting copper plates layered on top of the lithographs, he wanted to – in his own words – 'subvert' the image he had inherited, while creating 'a sense of the study of art in East Berlin' as he knew or imagined it.¹⁷

The images he inherited included portraits, nudes, heroic workers, still lifes and landscapes. They were drawn predominantly in a tonal manner, and one can sense a student working in an art academy, feeling his or her tentative way toward the creation of a sense of volume. Onto this space, Dine imposed the tracings of his familiar tools, asserting the importance of the sur-

face of the print. In many instances, the tools act as framing devices, for example, in the print in which a couple, drawn in the style characteristic of social realism, is shown enclosed by a hammer, metal cutters and shears, forming a proscenium arch towards which the figures advance (fig. 135). Likewise, a rather sad-looking nude is framed by two open bolt cutters, creating a feeling of confinement (fig. 136). Repeatedly, the incisive nature of Dine's drawing and the animation that he brings to his cast of tools acts as a riposte to the often inept drawings to which he is responding (fig. 137). Dine refutes any suggestion that the project was ideologically motivated, but this may be in order to discourage a simple and easy reading of the work. Susan Tallman comments that 'the tension between ideology and history on the one hand – the meanings we have learned to attach to things – and flat out experience on the other is at the core of [*A History of Communism*], collectively and individually'.¹⁸ And the use of tools as symbols for both East Germany (hammer and compass) and the Soviet Union (hammer and sickle) cannot be ignored. It is as if Dine relishes the chance to take the symbols on – instead of allowing them to represent authority and sublimation, making a mockery of them.

17. G. Sasse, *A History of Communism*, Göttingen 2014 p. 55.

18. S. Tallman, *Art in Print*, September–October 2014, IV, no. 3, p. 20.



131. Jim Dine, *Five Paintbrushes*, sixth state, 1973, etching, drypoint and aquatint, 356 x 692 mm (Image courtesy the artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London).



132. Rembrandt, *The Artist's Son Titus*, c. 1656, etching, 95 (trimmed) x 70 mm (London, British Museum).

Again Dine refuses to be pigeonholed: 'I don't know why I used the tools on top – I could have used hands or something – but I did [use the tools], and I thought it is such a jarring marriage.'¹⁹

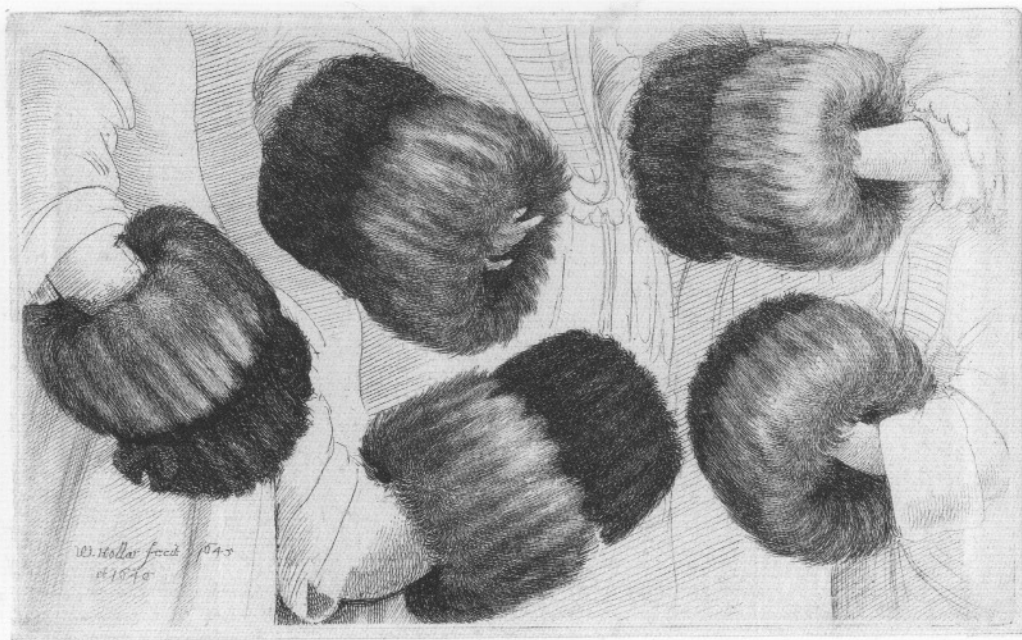
Returning to the moment in history when American art became dominant and, as Hal Foster writes,

Pollock and the other abstract expressionists began to be seen as important emissaries of the American experience: wildness now started to be recorded as freedom, a liberated sensibility increasingly deemed to be setting a good example for the cause of democracy in Cold War-torn Europe.²⁰

If one accepts this, Dine certainly belongs in this tradition of wildness and of the artist as maverick. Throughout his career, printmaking has functioned as a means for him to develop a personal iconography, as instantly recognizable as any artist's working today. Through this, he has produced a body of work that stands alongside the best in contemporary art. In 2014, Dine made a generous gift of over 200 prints to the British Museum, significantly given in honour of his longtime dealer and friend Alan Cristea. This provides not only a cause for celebration but ensures that,

19. *Conversation Dine Coldwell*.

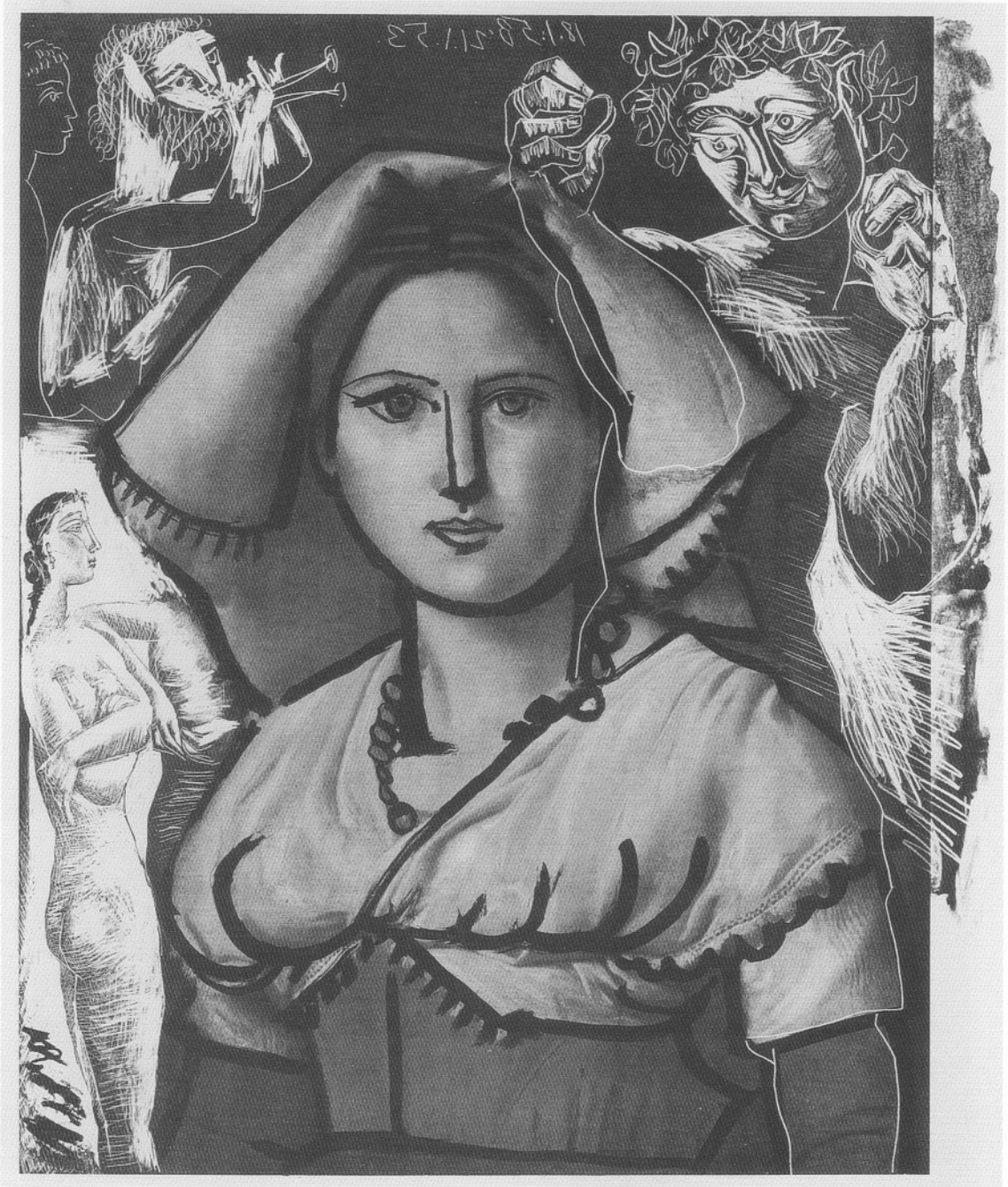
20. H. Foster and E. R. Krauss, *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, London, 2005 p. 355.



133. Wenceslaus Hollar, *A Muff in Five Views of Half Light, Half Dark Fur, Seen on a Woman's Arm*, 1645/46, etching, 77 x 127 mm (London, British Museum).

added to the work already in the collection, future generations will have the opportunity to study the work of this artist in the wider context of the history

of print. *A History of Communism* is within the gift and surely will be viewed as one of the major achievements of his late work.



134. Pablo Picasso, *The Italian Woman (After the Painting by Victor Orsel)*, second state, 1953, lithograph, 447 x 353 mm (Image courtesy Alan Cristea Gallery, London © Succession Picasso/DACS, London 2016).



135. Jim Dine, Plate 18 from portfolio *A History of Communism*, lithograph with etching and engraving, sheet 940 x 711 mm (Image courtesy the artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London).



136. Jim Dine, Plate 20 from portfolio *A History of Communism*, lithograph with etching and engraving, sheet 940 x 711 mm (Image courtesy the artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London).



137. Jim Dine, Plate 43 from portfolio *A History of Communism*, lithograph with etching and engraving, sheet 940 x 711 mm (Image courtesy the artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London).